



Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies



SPECIAL ASSESSMENT

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Asia-Pacific Responses to U.S. Security Policies

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A Marriage of Convenience: Russia's Response to U.S. Security Policies

R O U B E N A Z I Z I A N

Executive Summary

- Russia was one of the first countries to condemn the terrorist attacks on September 11 and pledge support to the U.S. war against al Qaeda and the Taliban. Moscow's support of the U.S.-led military campaign in Afghanistan was fully consistent with Russia's own attempts to contain the rise of Islamic extremism in Afghanistan and Central Asia and its spillover to Russia's Muslim regions, especially Chechnya.
- Even as Washington and Moscow profess to share the same aims in the global fight against terrorism, the two states disagree on the sources of international terrorism and remain competitors for influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia. This dichotomy raises many questions about the future strategic alignment of states in the region and Russia's future relations with the United States.
- The tension between Washington and Moscow also underscores Russian anxiety about America projecting its power at will in the post-September 11 era. Moscow calls for restraint and diplomacy when dealing with Iraq and North Korea, and condemns attempts to use preemptive strikes and bypass the United Nations.
- At the same time, Russia continues to use its influence in the former Soviet states to advance its geopolitical interests and has threatened preemptive strikes against neighboring Georgia, which is accused of harboring Chechen militants.
- Russia is disappointed that the United States continues to criticize its military operations in Chechnya and refuses to treat Chechen separatism as an international terrorist phenomenon.
- Moscow and Washington share a common approach to key aspects of non-proliferation but remain divided on the issue of Russia's assistance to Iran in the construction of nuclear reactors.
- Russia calls for a regional approach for the North Korean nuclear challenge and is promoting a broader regional security dialogue to deal with the Korean peace process.
- U.S.-Russian cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region remains limited. This lack of cooperation along with the continuing Russo-Japanese territorial disagreement, objectively increases Moscow's dependence on China. It would be in the U.S. interests to more fully engage Russia in the Northeast Asian security discussions and thereby assist the full normalization of Russo-Japanese relations.

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U.S.-RUSSIA RELATIONS AFTER SEPTEMBER 11

President Vladimir Putin was the first foreign leader to reach President George W. Bush on September 11 on Air Force One. He called President Bush again the next day to discuss cooperation against terrorism. That same day, in a nationally televised statement to the American people, President Putin said: "The event that occurred in the United States today goes beyond national borders. It is a brazen challenge to the whole of humanity, at least to civilized humanity.... Addressing the people of the United States on behalf of Russia, I would like to say that we are with you, we entirely and fully share and experience your pain. We support you." Russia responded to the heightened state of U.S. readiness by standing down its troops and canceling strategic bomber and missile exercises scheduled for mid-September. Moscow shared intelligence information about the infrastructure, locations, and training facilities of international terrorists and agreed to overflights by foreign planes and to their use of former Soviet air bases in the Central Asian nations.

In the Joint Statement by President George W. Bush and President Vladimir V. Putin on Counterterrorism Cooperation signed on May 24, 2002, Washington and Moscow reaffirmed their commitment to fight terrorism in all its forms and commended the efforts of the worldwide coalition against terrorism since the tragic events of September 11, 2001. They urged the member nations of the coalition to continue their concerted action to deny safe haven to terrorists; to destroy their financial, logistical, communications, and other operational networks; and to bring terrorists to justice. They noted with satisfaction that U.S.-Russia counterterrorism cooperation was making an important contribution to the global coalition against terrorism.

The counterterrorism cooperation has improved U.S.-Russia relations, which had cooled after the arrival of the Republican administration. In the Declaration on New Strategic Relationship signed during President Bush's visit to Russia in May 2002, Moscow and Washington declared that the era in which the United States and Russia saw each other as an enemy or strategic threat had ended.

Vladimir Putin's support for George W. Bush was consistent with his efforts to draw world attention to the terrorist threat. From the beginning of his presidency in January 2000, Putin pushed the idea of a concerted campaign against terrorism with American and European leaders. He was one of the first to raise the alarm about terrorist training camps in Afghanistan and to warn of linkages between these camps, well-financed terrorist networks, and Islamic militant groups operating in Europe and Eurasia. Russia also actively supported the Northern Alliance in its struggle with the Taliban in Afghanistan. In December 2000, Moscow joined Washington in supporting United Nations' sanctions against the Taliban and later appealed for sanctions against Pakistan for aiding the Taliban.

In explaining his support for the American-led antiterrorist coalition after September 11, Vladimir Putin said that Russia had also been a victim of terrorism. Specifically, he referred to the apartment building bombings two years earlier in Moscow and two other cities that killed 300 people. Moscow's support of the U.S.-led military campaign in Afghanistan was therefore fully consistent with its own attempts to contain the rise of Islamic extremism in Afghanistan and Central Asia and its spillover to Russia's Muslim regions, especially Chechnya. In 1999, certain Russian officials were even suggesting surgical military attacks against Taliban as a preventative measure. The Russian interest was summarized by the Chairman of the Federation Council (Upper Chamber) Foreign Affairs Committee Mikhail Margelov, who said on 22 December 2002 that for the first

time in many decades Russia had enhanced its national security without sacrificing the lives of its soldiers. "I am absolutely certain that if the United States had not come into Afghanistan, then we would have had to do so ourselves in order to defend our security from the Taliban," Margelov said.

LACK OF CONSENSUS ON CHECHNYA

A major concession that Moscow received in exchange for its support for the anti-terrorist campaign was the softening of U.S. criticism of Russian conduct in Chechnya. Before September 11, Russia had faced severe criticism for human rights abuses connected with its campaign against Chechen separatists. In a telephone conversation with President Bush two days after the attack, Putin spoke of acting against "a common foe" in Chechnya. White House spokesman Ari Fleischer called on leaders in Chechnya to "immediately and unconditionally cut all contacts with international terrorist groups such as Osama bin Laden and the al Qaeda organization." Washington, however, came under heavy pressure from Islamic governments as well human rights groups who urged it not to succumb to Moscow's one-dimensional approach to the Chechen problem. With the military campaign in Afghanistan proceeding faster than expected, the Bush administration soon started retreating from its anti-Chechen rhetoric. U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage set out the "new" policy very clearly: "We are trying to disassociate participation in the events in Chechnya of mujahedeen... from participation of the Chechens themselves who operate on the territory that is part of the Russian Federation. As for the former category, we enjoy absolute understanding with the Russian authorities. There is a certain discord when the latter category is concerned. We have always thought that a political resolution offers the only way out and will actually be a blessing for Russia."

Russia views the revival of criticism on Chechnya as a betrayal of the post-September 11 understanding for the Kremlin's fight against terrorism. A Russian Foreign Ministry statement on 25 January 2002 made the point: "It is surprising that the U.S. administration, which says it is necessary to fight any manifestation of terrorism all over the world, is actually encouraging Chechen extremists, whose direct connections with Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda are constantly being proved." Kremlin spokesman Sergei Yastrzhembsky responded to renewed Western criticism of Russia by stating: "It is impossible to successfully fight al Qaeda in Afghanistan and at the same time actually encourage its actions in Chechnya."

U.S. interest in acquiring Russia's support to use force against Iraq has prompted renewed efforts to narrow the gap between the two countries' perspectives on the Chechen problem. After his talks in Moscow on 28 January 2003, the U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage told the media that the United States is working "very closely" with Russia "about the process of designating some Chechen terrorist groups as foreign terrorist organizations."

DISAGREEMENTS ON CENTRAL ASIA

The U.S.-led war on terrorism has also seen American troops deployed to areas long seen in Moscow as part of Russia's natural sphere of influence, including Central Asia and Georgia. While Moscow was supportive of the U.S. military buildup in Afghanistan, it was much less enthusiastic about the expansion of U.S. military presence into Central

Asia and the Caucasus. However, it was probably in agreement with a popular Russian comedian who said at the time, “Better the Americans in Uzbekistan than the Taliban in Tatarstan.” After eventually and reluctantly agreeing to the deployment of U.S. troops in three Central Asian republics Moscow has been demanding a U.S. commitment to withdraw them as soon as the campaign in Afghanistan is over.

To accommodate Russian concerns, U.S. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, in an interview to a Russian newspaper on October 15, 2001, stated that the United States was not aiming to push Russia out of Central Asia. The Joint Press Statement by the U.S.-Russia Working Group on Afghanistan of February 12, 2002 contains an assurance by the United States not to establish permanent military bases in Central Asia. However, Russia remains concerned about the U.S. military presence in Central Asia and seeks clarification on the duration of the U.S. military presence in the region.

Russia’s acquiescence to U.S. military presence in Central Asia has provoked criticism in China, not to mention among conservatives at home, and is prompting Moscow to enhance its own military activities in the region as well as energize the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which includes China, Russia and four Central Asian states. In November 2002, Russia established an air base in Kant, Kyrgyzstan, reached new security and military agreements and arrangements with Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. During his December 2002 tour of Asian countries, President Putin promoted the SCO as the only long-term stabilizing factor in Central Asia, implying that the U.S. military presence in the region should be temporary.

DIFFERING INTERPRETATIONS OF THE AXIS OF EVIL

The U.S.-Russia cooperation in the war on terror is limited by still divergent geopolitical and economic interests of the two countries. Beyond the dangers posed by al Qaeda and the Taliban, the United States and Russia see terrorism quite differently. Nor do they agree about the nations that sponsor terrorism. Moscow, for example, refers to Pakistan and Saudi Arabia as the main sponsors of terrorist activity in the world and wants the United States to pressure both countries to curb their support of external extremism. During his visit to India in December 2002 President Putin made very sharp comments about Pakistan’s role in international terrorism, referring in particular to its support of crossborder activities in Kashmir.

Russia sees Iran as a stabilizing force in the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, not as a state sponsor of terrorism. North Korea is viewed as an unstable neighbor, but not a military threat. In other words, Bush’s axis of evil is not Putin’s. U.S. actions against the “axis of evil” countries — Iran, Iraq, and North Korea — affect both Russia’s position as a regional great power and her important economic interests. All three countries are within Russia’s centuries-old sphere of influence, and Moscow wants to play a central role in any development in its geopolitical backyard.

IRAQ

Russia strongly believes that an unjustified use of force against Iraq will lead to disastrous consequences for the entire Middle Eastern region. In Moscow’s conviction, a full-scale settlement of the Iraqi problem is possible only through dialogue, which would take into account the mutual concerns of both the world community and Iraq. Russia warns of regional instability precipitated by regime change.

Speaking to reporters on 3 February 2003, President Putin said that Moscow prefers to transform “the Iraq issue from a political matter into a technical one.” Vladimir Putin insisted that the UN weapons inspections should continue and noted that so far they “have found nothing.” Following the completion of the inspections, the UN Security Council should decide what comes next, Putin said. He added that “he and most Russians” continue to believe that a peaceful solution to the Iraq crisis can be found. He said that military force should be used only “in the most extreme case.”

As Iraq's major trading partner, Russia supplies Baghdad with \$700 million in goods under the UN-mandated oil-for-food program. Iraq owes an estimated \$8 billion to the Soviet Union and Russia, and Moscow wants to ensure that any post-Saddam government honors that debt. And Russia's top oil companies are pressing the Kremlin to protect their extensive and lucrative contracts with Baghdad.

IRAN

Similarly, Iran is Russia's third largest arms customer (after China and India). The arms sales agreement signed in 2001 could bring Moscow \$300 million in annual sales and could reach \$1.5 billion over the next few years — a hefty sum for the military-industrial complex starved by Yeltsin's demilitarization. In addition to conventional weapons, Russia exports missile and civilian-use nuclear technology to Iran.

Russia has long acknowledged aiding Iran's nuclear power program, but it has always denied assisting it with any project that could help Tehran build a nuclear weapon. Russia's Atomic Energy Minister, Aleksandr Rumyantsev, contends that Iran has violated no international rules in building the two nuclear sites that were disclosed through commercial satellite photographs. When President Bush visited Russia in May 2002, he was assured by Putin that Moscow was only aiding Iran in the production of nuclear power plants for peaceful purposes. Putin also noted that the United States had pledged to build a nuclear power plant in North Korea that is very similar in design to the one Russia is building at Bushehr, Iran. Putin also said that Russia is concerned about U.S. contributions to Taiwan's missile program.

However, Moscow has tried to accommodate the U.S. fears about its cooperation with Iran. In the Russo-Iranian accord on accelerated cooperation in the construction of the nuclear power plant in Bushehr, signed in December 2002, the two countries agreed that Moscow will supply uranium for Iran's nuclear reactors for the next 10 years and that the spent nuclear fuel will be returned to Russia for reprocessing. The return of the fuel to Russia should help ease U.S. concerns about Iran's nuclear program.

NORTH KOREA

Russia under Vladimir Putin has been energetically trying to revitalize its relations with North Korea, which were severely damaged by domestic political change in Russia after the dissolution of the USSR. Moscow is interested in economic projects in North Korea, and particularly in connecting the TransKorean and TransSiberian railroads. Kim Jong II visited Russia twice in the last two years and has shown interest in Russia's model of economic reform. Russian leadership suggests that North Korea should be encouraged to engage in domestic reforms. However, Moscow's influence on North Korea remains problematic, which became evident in Russia's irritation over North Korea's threat to resume its nuclear program.

Moscow reacted “with deep concern” to the statement by the DPRK Foreign Ministry spokesman about the country’s decision to “unfreeze its nuclear program” following the termination of supplies of compensatory heavy oil to Pyongyang that had been made under the 1994 Agreed Framework between the DPRK and the United States. Moscow also voiced serious concern over North Korea’s announcement of withdrawal from the NPT. Russia has called for the strict observance of the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons, implementation of the IAEA safeguards agreements, and the denuclearized status of the Korean Peninsula. At the same time, Russia is calling upon the parties concerned to solve the existing problems through dialogue on the basis of the earlier reached accords, including the 1994 Agreed Framework.

Russia has proposed a so-called package solution of the Korean problem, which consists of three basic provisions: first, confirmation of a nuclear-free status for the Korean Peninsula. Second, formation of a constructive bilateral and multilateral dialogue, which should result in an extension of security guarantees for the DPRK. Third, resumption of humanitarian and economic programs that had previously been implemented in the Korean Peninsula.

After conferring on 20 January 2003 with the North Korean leader for six hours Russian President’s Special Envoy Alexander Losyukov explained that the DPRK was of the view that the United States firmly intends to do away with the North Korean regime and to seek changes by the use of force. Pyongyang thinks that the United States is now “sorting things out” with Iraq, and then will take up North Korea. According to Losyukov, “these are most sincere fears; and this is the motivation for Pyongyang’s action.” Even though the envoy refused to clarify if Russia shared and sympathized with the North Korean fears, there is enough evidence to suggest that Moscow is very worried about the U.S. projection of force at will.

MIXED REACTION TO THE CONCEPT OF PREEMPTIVE STRIKES

Russia’s response to the U.S. National Security Strategy demonstrates Moscow’s attempt to interpret and apply the strategy using its own national security interests. On the one hand, there is a clear opposition to ensuring security by replacing the traditional containment policy with a concept of the preventive use of force. According to Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, “the threats and challenges arising for security and stability at this complex stretch of world development should be countered by a coordinated position of the international community, whether it is about the combating of international terrorism, the nonproliferation of WMDs or comprehensive settlement of the Iraqi problem. The most important thing is that an endeavor be made to work out effective political solutions based on the Charter of the United Nations and international law, which would take into account the lawful interests of all members of the world community. In the era of globalization, to put stakes on unilateral steps is not very promising.”

At the same time, Russia has toughened its policy toward neighboring Georgia, who is accused by Moscow of harboring Chechen terrorists in the Pankisi Gorge. Georgia has been warned of the possibility of Moscow’s preventive attacks on Georgian territory if it continues to be used by the Chechen militants and if Georgia refuses to cooperate with Moscow in stopping the militants’ incursions into Chechnya. While the Bush administration recognizes that Moscow has a legitimate security concern in Georgia, it has called for negotiations. Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov reacted to the U.S. position by suggesting that Moscow would strike preemptively “if our citizens are killed and if our

homes, buses, and helicopters are blown up.” He also denied that there were any parallels between Pankisi and Iraq, saying that Russia has “clear evidence of a terrorist threat [from Pankisi], while the United States only shows historical data when talking about a threat from Iraq.”

WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

Russia shares the spirit and main thrust of the U.S. National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). The Russian Foreign Ministry's statement notes that “competent American agencies have done a serious analysis and outlined very far-reaching tasks in countering one of the main global threats of today — the proliferation of WMDs. In so doing they correctly point out that today a flare of international terrorist activity has aggravated this danger.” The statement also emphasized that in the last few years, primarily due to the important agreements reached in the course of the Russian-American summit meetings, it has been possible to noticeably advance cooperation between the two countries on counter proliferation.

At the same time, Moscow is of the opinion that in order to advance the Russian-American partnership in the field of nonproliferation and prevent the acquisition of WMDs by international terrorists, the two sides should rely on traditional instruments of diplomacy, arms control, multilateral agreements, threat reduction assistance and export controls. Moscow also agrees that it is necessary to ensure the strict observance of fundamental international agreements such as the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons, the Chemical Weapons Convention and the Biological Weapons Convention.

Russia acknowledges that differences remain between the two countries on nonproliferation issues. Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov suggested, for example, that if the United States is worried that technologies may leak out of Russia and be used to develop WMDs, the two governments should together take decisions to cut the possible channels of illegal leakage of information. At the same time, according to Ivanov, “there should be no unsubstantiated accusation.”

Moscow welcomed the signing of a waiver on January 14, 2003 by President Bush that permits Congress to release funds under the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program (known as the “Nunn-Lugar Program”) for 2003. This program is directed to lending Russia assistance in the destruction of weapons of mass destruction and strategic delivery vehicles to be dismantled in accordance with Russia's obligations under international treaties. The Russian Foreign Ministry has expressed hope that the decision will give “positive impetus to solving other old problems hampering the full-scope Russian-American cooperation on nonproliferation issues.”

Russia believes that the U.S. unilateralist approach to arms control is more dangerous in terms of nuclear proliferation. It called the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty a mistake, and remains suspicious of the U.S. National Missile Defense Program (NMD). At the same time, Moscow realizes the U.S. determination to go ahead with the program and has been attempting to limit its scope and get involved in its development.

President Putin stated on 23 January 2003 that Russia might cooperate with the United States in the development of a missile-defense shield. Putin stressed, however, that such cooperation must be carefully coordinated in order to prevent information leaks. The latter statement could lead to the creation of a joint coordination center that will track data about missile launches for transmission to command centers in the United States and

Russia. Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov also said it is possible Moscow will cooperate with the United States in the development of its program, but that such cooperation will only be possible if the systems are not directed against one another and if a legal framework for such cooperation is created. He said U.S. plans for the program do not threaten Russia at present or in the foreseeable future, but that some elements of the proposed system “raise questions.”

CONCLUSION

The impact of September 11 on the U.S.-Russia relations is twofold. The two countries have reached new levels of cooperation in dealing with the situation in Afghanistan and the related terrorist threat. Vladimir Putin’s domestic agenda is the other driving force of Moscow’s interest in closer relations with the United States. At the same time, America’s proactive stance after September 11 and its determination to use force against potential terrorist threats makes Moscow very uncomfortable as it fears further increase in the power gap between itself and the United States. The most important shift in Putin’s foreign policy is the decision not to challenge the U.S. preeminence and objectionable (from Moscow’s point of view) policies. Instead, Putin has chosen to accommodate U.S. initiatives in hopes of deriving economic and political gains in the short term and Great Power status in the long run.